It should now be clear why works of popular astrology must be included in a study of prophecy in early modern society: the ties between the two fields are too numerous, the reciprocal influence too pervasive, and the number of common actors too high to ignore. Lichtenberger, a pioneer of astrology in print in 1475, became a compiler of prophetic works in 1488; the astrologer Johann Carion became synonymous with a “Hidden Prophecy” formulated in prophetic metaphors; astrologers’ addressing their predictions to noblemen recapitulated the audience of the Sibyl before Solomon and other scenes of prophetic dialogue.

Previous chapters have mentioned the practicas of various astrologers, referring to these works as prognostic booklets pertaining to a single year. As their name implies, practicas were not theoretical treatises: the title practica was applied in the fifteenth century to works on law, medicine, music, and astrology that gave specific application to bodies of theoretical knowledge. The existence of a theoretical basis was important to the authors of practicas, for it allowed them to differentiate their prognostications from the unfounded claims of unlearned charlatans or inventive printers. Wenzel Faber of Budweis frequently emphasized both the brevity and the theoretical foundation of these booklets, as he did in the closing lines of his practica for 1494: “Therefore these things that have been most briefly declared in
this prognostication are taken and collected from the rules of the philosophers and experience in the science of astrology.”¹ Practicas claimed to apply the principles of Greek and Arabic authorities to the configuration of the heavens in a particular year, including planetary conjunctions and eclipses, and therefore they were printed annually. This distinguishes practicas from the occasional tracts that responded after the fact to comets, auroras, and other unusual phenomena, but astrologers perceived a qualitative difference as well. As Carion explained to his patron in the introduction to a comet interpretation, “One cannot prognosticate as effectively with comets and such unusual signs as with planets, which have their certain and orderly motion and effect.”² Practicas were also interpretive works that provided more than the minimal and factual information usually found on broadside almanacs and calendars. Sigismund Fabri’s broadside almanac for 1493, for example, calls itself an “extract from the practica for Cologne of Master Sigmund.” Johannes Canter’s almanac for 1488 referred readers to his practica for information about agricultural fertility, the configuration of the heavens, and the fortunes of human estates.³ There are rare examples of broadside practicas, and prognostication can be found in some broadside almanacs, but almanacs, theoretical treatises, and practicas differ in their core functions: an almanac can be thought of as providing the astronomical input; the theoretical treatise as supplying the system of interpretive rules; and the practica as the system’s output, the word of the astrologer to his audience. From its origin as one type of application of systematic knowledge, the term practica became synonymous with the term prediction in the first half of the sixteenth century.

Practicas also represented an annually updated response to gradual changes and periodic crises in early modern society. As the principal customers and readers of practicas, the literate urban classes could not indefinitely be subsumed under the category of lay peasants, as they appeared in Lichtenberger’s Prognosticatio, and printed practicas dealt with the changing nature of society in new ways. Like other prophetic and prognostic works, practicas were “expressions of a crisis situation” whose ultimate causes included the introduction of print.⁴

In a compilation of prophetic and prognostic texts published in 1584, Johann Rasch wrote that there are three kinds of prognostication: there are, first of all, prophecies for no specific year, perhaps dealing with the end times, but most of them are mere dreams; then there are prognostications based on conjunctions and eclipses that treat multiple years, but most of
them are mere fantasies; and then there are the prognostications for a single year, called practicas, of which there are so many that no one gains much honor from them, and most are held (for good reason) to be full of falsehood. Rasch states that the practicas include, first of all, the astrologers’ reasoning based on equinoxes, eclipses, and ruling planets, followed by six sections: first, agricultural fertility; second, illness; third, war and peace; fourth, the good and ill fortunes of human estates; fifth, the good and ill fortune of lands and cities; and sixth, the weather of each season and moon phase (although, Rasch observes, this is now commonly placed in the calendar rather than in the practica). There is much that can be learned about prognostication in print at the end of the sixteenth century from Rasch’s statement, including the distinctions between practicas and other types of prognostic booklets. Although Rasch had observed recent changes, the practica that he described reflects a format that had remained quite stable for ninety years. There are German practicas from the 1490s and in every following decade that meet Rasch’s description in every respect, but there are no such practicas from the 1480s.

The existence of a prototypical form becomes apparent upon inspection of many individual practicas, which tend to share many features. Although the practicas of each author reflect an individual style that usually remained stable from year to year, the accretion of changes over several years often led to an increasing resemblance to the prototype, which thus becomes visible as an attractor to which disparate authors were drawn. For example, the first known practica of Michael Krautwadel, for 1528, has a structure consisting of eighteen chapters that had not been current since the late fifteenth century, but Krautwadel’s last known practica, for 1536, followed the prototype exactly. Anti-astrological or merely humorous parodies point to an awareness of a prototype when they mock or distort it. A fool’s practica for 1527, for example, consists of a title page with woodcut followed by an introduction and then chapters parodying the ruling planets, “waters,” agriculture, illness, war, various cities, the seasons, and the months. Such parodies depend for their comedic effect on subverting genre conventions, and thus can serve as a reliable indicator of contemporary perceptions of a conventional form.

Positing a prototypical form allows us to deal not only with the broad similarity between many practicas but also with the many variations. If the prototype is defined by multiple characteristics—some near the core, some more marginal, but none entirely definitive by itself—then we can differen-
tiate typical practicas from the experimental efforts of some authors, from idiosyncratic or archaic practicas, or from prognostic booklets that have nothing in common with practicas except their titles. The characteristics of the prototypical practica, at least for the years 1501–50, include the following:

1. The name *practica* (or some variant) in the title was nearly universal, occurring in over 280 of the 306 German-language practicas known from this time period. Not everything that called itself a practica actually was one, however. Various editions of prophetic works, including the *Extract of Various Prophecies*, Lichtenberger’s *Prognosticatio*, the booklet of “Jakob Pflaum,” and a broadside edition of “Theodericus Croata/Dietrich von Zeng,” called themselves practicas.

2. After parity between the number of German and Latin editions was reached by 1490, German quickly became the predominant language (see figure 11, later in this chapter). Compared to 306 practicas in German (including Low German) in the first half of the sixteenth century, we find only 55 in Latin. Almost two-thirds of German practicas mention the language in the title, which most frequently began with the phrase *practica teutisch* (or *teutsch, deutsch, dütsch*, or another of the numerous orthographic or dialectal variations on that word), even after German had become the language of choice in over 90 percent of editions.

3. Practicas were prose works. The few verse practicas (including Marcus Schynnagel’s verse practica for 1491, an anonymous broadside for 1500, Johannes Stabius’s practica for 1503–4 and Sebastian Brant’s broadside for 1504)⁷ are so different from the typical practica in so many additional ways that it is doubtful that they should be counted as practicas at all (much as the verse *Turk Calendar* printed by Gutenberg was a calendar only in form but not in primary function).

4. Title pages for German practicas, which had been uncommon in the 1480s, were all but universal by the beginning of the sixteenth century, paralleling the development of title pages as a constitutive feature of printed books.⁸ Italian practicas rarely had separate title pages or woodcuts on title pages before 1520, however.⁹

5. The layout of practicas’ title pages followed a set pattern, with the title formulation at the top of the page followed by a woodcut that usually represented the ruling planet or planets for the year according to a stan-
standardized anthropomorphic iconography: Mars as an armored man, Mercury as a scholar with a caduceus, and so on. The imprint information and an assertion of privilege against reprinting (either real or merely claimed) often followed the woodcut. Practicas without woodcuts on the title page were all but unknown from 1501 to 1530, and only 24 out of 303 practicas before 1551 found in VD16 clearly lack them. Later practicas tended to replace the single illustrations of the ruling planets with scenes composed of multiple smaller woodcuts, which could be remixed in different configurations each year. Illustrations after the title page are uncommon (occurring in 49 editions, compared to 241 editions with only title woodcuts).

6. The title formulation always identified the author. The only sixteenth-century anonymous practicas are fragments whose title page has been lost. Identification of the person to whom the practica was dedicated was also very common, while several practicas specify a city for which they were prepared. Georg Tannstetter warned his readers not to “buy any broadside, practica, or booklet unless it has printed on it who made it, and at the back who printed it, and where, and when; thus one may avoid falsely invented practicas made by unlearned and ignorant people and other shameful booklets.”

7. The predominant format in the first half of the sixteenth century was two small quarto signatures of four leaves each. Single gatherings of eight leaves were uncommon after the fifteenth century. Fully 174 of the 278 editions between 1501 and 1550 for which format is recorded consist of eight leaves, and another 43 consist of six or seven leaves. Only 25 editions reached a length of twelve leaves or longer. More extensive practicas became more common only in the second half of the sixteenth century. For practicas before 1551, the leaves were almost never paginated or foliated.

8. Practicas were made for just a single year and were presumed to appear annually. Apart from works addressing the conjunctions of 1524 and a limited number of highly popular works by Virdung, Carion, Paracelsus, and Salomon von Roermond, there were perhaps no more than ten true multiyear practicas.

9. Practicas opened usually with a dedicatory epistle and less commonly with an introduction addressed to the reader, which often defended astrology by citing Greek and Arabic authorities and provided a biblical
justification for astrological prognostication, while anticipating criticism that its predictions diminished the free will of God or human beings by disavowing such intentions. The typical argument held that God was above the planets and controlled their influences, while the righteous, who were not controlled by their bodies, could resist the influence of the planets.

10. The practica proper consisted of around seven chapters, often in the sequence found in Rasch’s description previously mentioned. The chapter divisions were meant to make the material more easily comprehensible to readers, as Virdung stated in his practicas for 1495 and 1510 and as Anton Brelochs affirmed in his practicas for 1538 and 1543. Italian practicas tended to retain the older form of many short chapters and to have a greater emphasis on political predictions.

11. The first chapter (sometimes split into two) identified significant astronomical occurrences during the year, including conjunctions and eclipses, and the ruling planet or planets as determined by the location of the sun at the beginning of the year or of each season of the year. “It is the invariable custom of the masters of the stars to select lords of the coming year at the beginning of their practicas,” wrote a critic of astrology, “Faithful Eckhart,” in his contrapractica for 1533. But practicas by different authors differ considerably in their selection of ruling planets. Practicas were not merely interpretive works but also argumentative and persuasive ones.

12. The sequence of the next three chapters on agricultural fertility, illness, and war may vary, but this trio can be found already in medieval astrological treatises, and it persists into the seventeenth century and later, even when other sections are omitted.

13. The next chapter treated human fortunes by allotting occupational classes to one of the seven planets. Soldiers, smiths, and others who work with fire were assigned to Mars, for example, while women, entertainers, and those ruled by lust were assigned to Venus. This seven-way planetary model mostly displaced other competing models of society beginning in the 1490s, including tripartite divisions according to religion or estate, but some authors persisted in use of older models or experimented with new ones.

14. The following chapter typically dealt with the fortunes of lands or cities. Some later practica authors introduced tables of geographic loca-
tions governed by particular zodiacal signs. Other topics, such as the mining of various metals, are found in fifteenth-century practicas but disappeared almost entirely in the sixteenth century.

15. The final chapter or two, sometimes treated as a second section unto itself, provided a calendar of moon phases and weather and sometimes other kinds of propitious days, according to each month and season. “All practica writers until now have written earnestly about the new and full moons of the twelve months, first cold or warm, then wet and damp in another, as if it were true and certain,” the pseudonymous “Faithful Eckhart” explained.17 In the practicas of the 1480s from Wenzel Faber and others, the calendrical treatment of weather had often comprised the second or third chapter, but Faber and nearly all others abandoned this early placement after 1490.18 A brief conclusion was also common.

While none of these features were by themselves unique or essential, all of them together comprise a set of features that identified the practica genre to customers and guided readers’ expectations of what they might find within the booklet. Not only the text but also the title pages and their woodcuts and other features influenced how practicas were perceived.

As small booklets that were often sold together with calendars, the practicas were suited better to cursory examination in combination with multiple texts than to intensive study. Georg Tannstetter’s German practica for 1524 both referred readers to the Latin version for a fuller astrological argument and encouraged readers to compare his reasoning with that found in other practicas, just as Johann Carion would later encourage the dedicatee of his Interpretation and Revelation to compare the work with other prognostications.19 Berchthold Eipelius was not so encouraging; he complained in his practica for 1545 about the mean-spirited habit of those who did not understand the art of astrology who “buy up as many practicas as they can and compare them to each other, often finding that one predicts rain, the other snow, the third humidity, and so on.”20

The German practicas were long associated with New Year’s greetings. The chapter on foolish superstitions in Brant’s Narrenschiff that mentioned practicas also mocked the belief that those who do not receive New Year’s gifts from friends will suffer ill fortune during the upcoming year.21 One of the first practicas with an illustrated title page, that of Johannes Angelus for 1488, featured not planets but the Christ child and the wish “May the newborn child that Mary bore give us a good and blessed New Year.”22 In 1510,
one Antwerp printer intercepted a copy of the practica of Jasper Laet for 1511, hastily reprinted it by letting his associates work on Christmas Day, and thus ruined the New Year’s Day business of a competitor. Johann Carion’s dedication of his practica for 1531 states that he had prepared it so that he could present his benefactor, the electoral prince of Brandenburg, “with a small gift for a blessed New Year.” Balthasar Wilhelm’s Lutheran contrapactica of 1524 states that it was drawn from scripture rather than from the unreliable art of Ptolemy and other astrologers and was intended as a Christmas gift for his dedicatee. The preface of the 1525 edition, however, recasts the work as a New Year’s greeting: “I find in traditional use that a good friend always honors another at New Year’s with the wish for a good year. Therefore I wish all people a good New Year and a good new life in Christ, and in addition to read this practica.” The contrapactica of Faithful Eckhart also begins with wishes for a happy New Year. One further notes that Luther’s sermon for New Year’s Day published in 1524 includes a spiritual interpretation of astronomical signs, while the Lutheran preacher Johannes Züntel made astrological prognostication the topic for his New Year’s Day sermon in 1607. In addition to urging the rejection of astrological predictions, Züntel reprints with his sermon the entire revelation of “Brother Raimund” (the “Auffahrt Abend” prophecy). The connection of practicas to New Year’s Day and the likelihood of their printing close to that day makes it more useful to cite practicas according to the year of their relevance rather than the year of their printing. It is assumed that most practicas for the new year were printed shortly before the end of the old year, particularly from the beginning of the sixteenth century onward.

**The Print History of the German Practica**

A prototype based on multiple characteristics helps to untangle some problems in the early history of printed practicas. Often mentioned as the earliest printed practica is the practica for 1470–78 of Theobertus of England, attributed to the press of Günther Zainer of Augsburg around 1470. But this broadside is not a practica in the technical sense of the term. It is, rather, a series of predictions for subsequent years that glide from weather and pestilence to the fates of kings and empires, and it is more closely related to the “Toledo Letter” and similar astrologically themed political prophecies. It is an important document in the history of astrology and prophecy in print, as it shows the early intersection of the two fields and attests an early use of
practizieren in the sense of “prognosticate,” but this list of predictions shares little with later practicas. Other examples of early astrological editions can be seen, at best, as precursors of the practica, such as Lichtenberger’s *Conjunction of Saturn and Mars* or the several comet tracts printed around 1472.

The earliest practicas in print began to appear nearly simultaneously across Europe in the mid-1470s. The earliest attestations of annual prognostic booklets are from Franciscus Guasconus (beginning 1474) and Hieronymus de Manfredis (1475) in Italy, followed soon thereafter by those from Petrus Advogarius (1477) and Paul of Middelburg (1478); Johannes Laet (1476) in the Low Countries and France; and Johannes (Schelling) of Glogau in Germany (1479). There are other early practicas, but these are fragmentary, isolated, or anonymous. A fragment in German dated 1474–78 may represent an earlier German practica author than Johannes of Glogau, but it illustrates, above all, the problematic state of preservation of early ephemeral works.

Among the first generation of German practica authors, Wenzel Faber of Budweis towers above all the rest, with fifty-six incunable editions (and one more in 1506, in addition to some thirty almanacs), including practicas for every year between 1482 and 1501. Faber’s practicas were printed primarily by Martin Landsberg and other Leipzig printers, but there were also twelve Nuremberg editions and several more in other German cities. Among German astrologers published during the 1480s, Johannes of Glogau and Martin Polich reached only fourteen and sixteen editions, respectively. Even compared to foreign contemporaries, Faber finds no equal: there are twenty-eight known practicas from Petrus Advogarius, twenty-three from Hieronymus de Manfredis, seventeen from Marcus Scribannarius, twelve annual practicas from Paul of Middelburg (thus not including his popular *Prognostication for 20 Years*), and nine known practicas from Johannes Laet.

The structure of Faber’s earliest practica illustrates how radically the German practicas changed between the 1480s and the 1490s and why Faber, for all his early dominance, must be considered the grandfather, rather than the father, of the genre. Compared to later prototypical practicas, Faber’s earliest known practica, a German prognostication for 1482, is an exercise in chaos. Following the introduction, the practica is divided into “words” (*verba* in Faber’s early Latin practicas). The chapter and subsection headings in larger type (however inconsistently applied) establish the following structure:
1. “On great events and the course of the circuit of the heavens” (discussing the scale of astrological prediction);
2. “On the planets and lords of this year”;
3. “On the general events of this year according to the four qualities” (that is, hot, cold, wet, and dry);
4. “On the nature of the four seasons”;
5. “On moon phases and the propitious days of the entire year”;
6. “On the three estates, namely Jews, Christians, and heathens”;
7. “On the state of fruits in general” (including agricultural produce, domesticated animals, and fish);
8. “On pestilence”;
9. “On illness”;
10. “On war and peace”;
11. “On messages and letters”;
12. “On the highest human estate” (including the pope, cardinals, kings, and princes);
13. “On various kingdoms and lands” (including Meissen, Italy, Bohemia, Hungary, Austria, Moravia, Bavaria, Poland, Little Poland, Silesia, Franconia, England and Flanders, France and Burgundy, and Prussia, Lithuania, Saxony, Brandenburg, Norway, and Sweden)
14. “On various cities” (discussing Leipzig, the women of Leipzig, Prague, Cracow, Würzburg, Nuremberg, and Breslau);
15. “On officials, clerics, and other worthy people”:
   a. “On the estate of knights and soldiers” (including princely servants, knights, squires, surgeons, goldsmiths, barbers, bottle makers, bathers, and smiths of all types);
   b. “On students and learned people” (including masters of the liberal arts, astronomers, astrologers, logicians, physicists, grammarians, copyists, alchemists, poets, all masters of the arts, and all clever people);
   c. “On virgins and women” (including virgins, women, singers, painters, lyre players and their masters, adulterers, and the unchaste);
   d. “On merchants” (also including retailers);
   e. “On clerics” (including monks, Carthusians, and all who lead a solitary life, who, in addition, share their fate with farmers, sailors, poor
people, craftsmen, cobblers, tanners, other hand workers, and all animals that walk or fly by night);  

16. “On ores and metals” (including gold, silver, lead, tin, iron, and copper)  
17. “On the common people.”

One senses a profusion of competing organizational principles, particularly with regard to human beings, who are addressed in four different and non-contiguous chapters. Friedrich Creussner began issuing practicas in 1485 with an offering from Faber that is, if anything, even more chaotic in its organization, with three chapters divided into multiple “words.” The calendrical material forms the second chapter, the three religions are in the first chapter, and other human fates are in the last. The contemporary and earlier practicas of Johannes of Glogau, for their part, have even more chapters in a similarly complex arrangement.

During the later 1480s, Faber rationalized the arrangement of chapters in a number of ways that anticipate the prototypical form. By the time Creussner printed Faber’s practica for 1487, Faber had found an arrangement that would subsequently change very little. The general disposition of the year, the four seasons, and the moon phases and propitious days of each month were moved to the end of the practica, forming a calendrical section. The chapters on minerals and messengers were dropped entirely. The remaining chapters of the first section resemble the arrangement of the prototypical practicas, although human affairs were treated over the course of eight chapters, hindering identification with particular planets, and the three religions were still treated in a separate section. Faber’s fame and his association with practicas can be seen in the title page of an anonymous practica for 1499, which declares that it is “in the form of Master Wenzel of Budweis.”

Johannes Virdung (died ca. 1539), Faber’s younger colleague and fellow citizen of Leipzig from 1487–91, began publishing practicas in 1489 or 1490, launching a career that would, over the next half century, surpass even Faber’s accomplishments. Virdung’s earliest practicas closely followed Faber’s model; in fact, confusion between Virdung and Faber seems to have been intentional. Friedrich Creussner’s edition of Virdung’s Latin practica for 1492 begins with the title “Judicium Liptzense. W. Cracoviensis” and identifies the author only as “ego iohannes W. cracoviensis,” who follows in the footsteps of other astrologers. Another edition replaced Virdung’s name with Faber’s altogether.
Beginning with Creussner’s edition of Virdung’s German practica for 1493, however (and corresponding to Virdung’s move from Leipzig to Heidelberg), innovations appeared that become fixed elements of practicas for many decades to come. Where Virdung’s Latin practica for 1493 still retained a chapter on minerals, his German practica for that year ignored them, as did his later practicas in both languages. The fates of lands and cities, which Faber had treated in two chapters, were now combined in one chapter. Faber had distinguished pestilences from illnesses and treated each separately; Virdung likewise combined them in a single chapter. Beginning with the German practica for 1493, Virdung began bringing all human affairs into the scope of one chapter and a single system of classification based on ruling planets. While Faber persisted with eighteen total chapters until his final published practica, Virdung reduced the number of chapters to nine or ten in his German practicas in the mid-1490s and in his Latin practicas somewhat later, then to seven or eight chapters from the early sixteenth century until issuing his last practica for 1538. Virdung’s German practica for 1493 from Creussner’s press had a title page with a woodcut illustration of the ruling planet (in this case, a nude Venus). Practicas with similar title pages had appeared as early as a practica for 1487, itself a product of competition with Wenzel Faber in his home market of Leipzig, but woodcut illustration became a continuing feature of practica title pages only after Virdung’s practica for 1493. The prototypical composition of the title page became standard first in German practicas and only later in Latin ones.

The earliest practicas of the 1470s and 1480s printed in Germany and elsewhere attest much experimentation with basic structure, so that none of Virdung’s innovations are entirely unprecedented. There were earlier attempts to rationalize the structure of the practicas, and Paul of Middelburg’s practica for 1482 has an arrangement in nine chapters that resembles the format Virdung standardized, but Middelburg’s practica for 1486 returned to an eighteen-chapter format, most of which addressed the fortunes of particular Italian sovereigns. Only through Johannes Virdung’s practicas can one find a continuous tradition connecting the end of the fifteenth century to the prototypical practica described by Rasch near the end of the sixteenth. Virdung’s German practica for 1493 from the press of Friedrich Creussner is so similar to the sixteenth-century prototype as to be all but indistinguishable from it. Evidence of Virdung’s influence can be seen in the over one hundred editions of his works published before 1545, including eighteen editions of tracts addressing comets or other sporadic
phenomena, fourteen editions of a multiyear practica based on the great conjunction of 1524 that was combined with Lichtenberger’s Prognosticatio in another five editions, two editions of a multiyear apocalyptic practica for the great conjunction of 1504, and sixty-two annual practicas. In his practica for 1521, Konrad von Spiegelberg called himself Virdung’s disciple, while printer Jakob Köbel, in the title of his practica for 1523, called Virdung his master. But the clearest indication of Virdung’s influence is his use already in the 1490s of the prototypical structure that came to define the genre. The list of practica authors who followed Virdung’s prototype at various times is lengthy, including Georg Leimbach, Endres von Weinmer, Philadelphus von Rietheim, Anton Brelochs, Bartholomaeus Mangolt, Michael Krautwadel, Johann Wolmar, Dionysius Sibenburger, Philipp Melhöfer, Walther Hermann Ryff, and Peter Creutzer. Others, including Christoph Statmion, Matthias Brotbeihel, Nikolaus Prueckner, Mads Hack, Aegidius Camillus, Johannes Schöner, and Johann Carion, preferred slight variations on Virdung’s arrangement. Gustav Hellmann observed the widespread conformity of practicas and considered it an inheritance from manuscript prognostications or a development of the last quarter of the fifteenth century, but the typical format he describes has a more specific origin. While Klaus Matthäus believed that the homogeneous structure of printed practicas had been present from the beginning, it was, in fact, an innovation that can be traced to the German practicas of Johannes Virdung printed by Friedrich Creussner in the early 1490s.

While practicas often identified a particular city for which they were intended, they were also exported to other regions (where their predictions were less certain, as Dionysius Sibenburger complained in his practica for 1535). Peter Apian appears to have targeted a national market in 1541, for he stated that he strove to find a median for all of Germany. But practicas, as a genre and as a commercial ware, were limited by national boundaries. In the fifteenth century, practicas were rare outside of Germany, Italy, and, to a lesser extent, the Netherlands, and German and Italian practicas differed significantly in form and content. Reprinting of Italian or Dutch practicas in Germany or their translation into German were all but unknown, amounting to only ten editions from 1470 to 1550.

The number of practicas published in the German language area in each decade shows a rise during the 1480s and 1490s, followed by a substantial contraction in the market in the first decade of the sixteenth century (see figure 11). This statement requires two cautionary notes, however. For
ephemera such as practicas, one assumes a certain number of lost editions, particularly in view of the many editions known from a single copy or even from a single leaf. Also, the border between 1500 and 1501 marks the bibliographic divide between incunables and postincunables, which occasionally entails a declining diligence in library cataloging. Yet, however one looks at the data, the same picture emerges of a market crash in the early 1500s. Steady initial growth in the publication of practicas after 1480 was followed by a precipitous decline, and their publication only approached its previous heights in the 1520s. Another way to characterize the German practica market is by the diversity of authors that the market could sustain: that is, for any given year, how many authors could find publishers (and thus customers) for their practicas? Again we find that the 1490s had significantly more regularly publishing astrologers, up to nine each year, than the next decade, which had three or fewer in most years, and that the market did not support a similar diversity of astrologers until the 1520s.

Comparing the publishing careers of practica authors provides a truly revelatory view of the market and of Virdung’s significance. Let us assume for the moment that each astrologer composed a practica each year. Tannstetter wrote in 1523 that he had authored practicas for the last nineteen years, and the earliest known practica by him was probably published in 1504, although we are missing practicas from eight intervening years. Christoph Statmion claimed to have authored practicas beginning in 1540, although the earliest known practica from him is for 1543 (and the earliest known according to VD16 is for 1547). If we use the earliest and latest known practicas to measure the duration of astrologers’ careers, we find that with the exception of Johannes Virdung, every German astrologer publishing practicas before 1500 had exited the field by 1510. Virdung’s career overlapped with every single earlier German astrologer in print and with some younger colleagues who were still publishing after 1560. Of the three astrologers publishing in the years just before 1510, Conrad Tockler’s career did not reach 1520, and Georg Tannstetter’s career as an author of practicas ended in 1525. Virdung’s practicas established the prototype thanks in no small part to Virdung’s enduring presence.

Even Virdung’s record in the first decade of the sixteenth century is spotty, however. His judgments on the great conjunction of 1504 and a comet of 1506 each went through multiple editions, but the only practicas extant from Virdung are those for the years 1503 and two editions for 1510, although Virdung is known to have composed an annual practica for 1504.
The practica for 1503 was printed by Hermann Bungart in Cologne, who had printed no works by Virdung or practicas from any other author before and would never do so again, and the form of the practica for 1503 differs considerably from Virdung’s typical arrangement, while the practicas for 1510 follow the prototypical form. Even the prince of the German astrologers (as one contemporary referred to him in 1525) would appear to have had a difficult decade at the start of the sixteenth century.

**Stars, Society, and the Microcosmic Practica**

Perhaps Virdung’s most significant innovation with respect to Faber’s earlier practicas is the rigorous subjection of all other models of society to the sevenfold system of “planet children,” in which various occupations are assigned to one of the seven planets known to medieval astronomy. This was not Virdung’s invention but, rather, an inheritance from Arabic astrologers that was being popularized for German urban audiences as early as 1430. Martin Polich had used it as the sole system for classifying people in his practica for 1488 (before omitting the human estates entirely in his practica for the following year), while Faber had used it alongside other systems. Virdung, however, made it the categorical system that subsumed all others. Virdung’s first step only brought the traditional categories together into
one chapter, as in his practica for 1493, but by 1495, human beings of all religions and estates were explicitly subdivided according to one of the seven planets. The fifth chapter of Virdung’s Latin practica for 1495, “on the state of diverse peoples,” classifies people as follows:

(Saturn) Jews, monks, the aged and infirm, cobblers, and craftsmen;
(Jupiter) the pope, cardinals, bishops, and priests;
(Mars) Turks, Tatars, knights, cavalrymen, soldiers, doctors, and surgeons;
(Sun) kings and princes;
(Venus) women, girls, singers, and musicians;
(Mercury) scholars, students, merchants, alchemists, sorcerers, and other lovers of the liberal arts;
(Moon) the common people, travelers, and servants.\(^{51}\)

Where Wenzel Faber’s practicas had used overlapping categories for human beings that included a religious division between Christians, Jews, and Muslims, Virdung found a place for the religions among the planets. Practica authors providing detailed categorizing of social classes according to occupation often spent as much or more effort sorting out who belonged where as they did on actual prognostication, which suggests that for many of these authors, predicting society’s future was less important than determining its present composition.

The sevenfold planetary system proved flexible enough to accommodate new urban classes and an early modern society in which lay piety, middle-class prosperity, and new opportunities for women were obscuring traditional social patterns. Other occupations found in an early modern city or other human characteristics could easily be added by analogy, although that assignment was not always stable. Most authors, including Michael Krautwadel and Dionysius Sibenbürgler, considered book printers to be intellectuals under the sign of Mercury, while Christoph Hochstetter’s practicas after 1519 moved printers from Mercury to the company of entertainers ruled by Venus.\(^{52}\) The Tract against the Turks of 1486 had seen what it called the “sin against nature,” next to unworthy handling of the Eucharist, as one of the two great transgressions that had brought down the Turks on Christianity as punishment, just as they had once brought about the Flood of Noah.\(^{53}\) The practicas, however, deal with those whom they call “effeminate men” as just one of the many classes of people in early modern society by delegating them to the sphere of Venus. (The practica for 1481 of Julianus de
Blanchis lists *eunuchi* between “virgins” and *cantores organiste citariste* and other musicians, rather than among the *adulteri fornicatores* and other lust-driven sinners, while Virdung’s practica for 1528 lists the *weybish menner* between virgins and singers. However, Gregor Salzmann’s practica for 1544 explicitly includes “effeminate men” along with wooers in the list of “all those who make use of bodily lust.”

The categorization of all strata of society under the seven planets is all the more remarkable in light of the considerable anxiety with which astrologers addressed human affairs or their omission of the topic altogether. Jeremias Brotbeihel noted in his practica for 1530, “Writing about all the estates, or lands and cities, is tiresome and uncertain and often causes envy, hate, and repugnance, and therefore I will leave it be for this year.” More than a few practica authors, perhaps with increasing frequency over the course of the sixteenth century, followed a maxim of Georg Tannstetter: “Learned and wise men never write anything publicly about the fate of the emperor and great princes.”

Even when astrologers omitted the fortunes of all human estates, practicas addressed the structure of early modern society in other ways. Title formulations often named the nobleman to whom a practica was dedicated, which was an affirmation of the existing political order, while illustrations of the ruling planets for the year also evoked a particular model of social structure. Georg Tannstetter’s Latin practica for 1512 makes the celestial and terrestrial social order explicitly parallel; while the title woodcuts in the two editions are different, the motto above each woodcut is the same: “Jupiter rules all things in the heavens, the emperor rules all things on earth.” If the practicas reflect the order of the cosmos and of human society, the representations of the ruling planets on the title page, usually reinforced by a first chapter on the same celestial lords of the year, served as reminders that higher things rule over lower ones.

The dedicatory epistle that typically followed the title page also addressed both stars and social relationships. While some dedications are addressed to the reader, most shift the communicative framework to a prognosticator in private communication with a political ruler, like the Sibyl’s audience before Solomon, by addressing a noble patron. Conclusions that again address the dedicatee reinforce the staging of practicas as a private conversation. Nikolaus Prueckner, in the dedicatory epistle of his multiyear practica for 1538–45, saw the dedication of written works as a way to mediate relationships between rulers and their subjects.
From the ancients until today, whenever learned men desire to publish their work and labor, it has always been the belief and practice (not without good cause) that they particularly dedicate these works to respected and leading persons such as kings, princes, and rulers before any others. For from time immemorial such honor and respect have ever been given to the arts, either from the necessity of protection and defense against the unlearned and despisers of the same who revile and condemn generally, or because it is the right of princes and authorities to inquire what will be presented to the common people and their subjects, so that the iniquity and wantonness of many unlearned people can be avoided. I, too, did not want to depart from this practice but, rather, prefer to commend my work, although trivial, beforehand to your princely grace as a particularly informed person and let it be examined, as I have recently promised your princely grace, in the hope that my work might have more defense and protection and also more regard and respect, because of your princely grace, than if it were published without it.  

This dedication communicated to its readers that the work had been presented to the prince by the astrologer and that the prince had granted both his approval and his protection. A modern observer might call this process censorship, and Georg Tannstetter uses the same term, *censieren*, for what he asks the cardinal of Gurk to do with respect to the practica dedicated to him in 1518. The prefatory dedication not only situated the reader with respect to the text or the author but also (perhaps primarily) reaffirmed the place of both author and reader within the existing social order. “Astrological patronage,” as Steven Vanden Broecke has recognized, “publicly unveiled the prince’s control over future events,” and its products were “public tokens of princely power.”

The function of dedicatory epistles can also be seen in the consequences that follow the omission of a dedication. Johannes Copp was an early and devoted follower of Martin Luther, to whom he dedicated a practica for the year 1521. Copp appears to have brought considerable difficulty on himself in 1522 by predicting uprisings against the Catholic clergy in his tract of that year on the ominous conjunction of 1524. (The edition of Heinrich Steiner in Augsburg is a classic example of diverging intentions between woodcuts on title pages and prognostic texts. In the final section, Copp explains that the stars foretell not a world-ending deluge but only severe flooding and other troubles, which earnest prayers may yet induce God to turn aside. The title woodcut, however, repeated just before Copp’s consoling judgment,
shows a dramatic scene of deluge, with pounding rain falling on hills and mountains; some houses and church towers collapse, others are covered to their roofs in water, and people float amid the houses and raise their arms in a last call for aid.) Compared to other astrologers’ caution, Copp’s prediction of social unrest against the clergy is unusually direct. The booklet opens with eighteen lines of verse addressed to the clergy, claiming that Copp bore them no ill will and was merely interpreting the stars. Nevertheless, Copp wrote, “Heaven shows you that an awful plague is in store for you. Watch out, for it will damage your body, honor, and life.” Copp made similarly dire predictions in later sections, writing, for example, “But I think that the eclipse [of 1523] will mean much evil, such as great war, much spilling of blood, burning, disunity and uproar between the common man and the clergy. One also fears an uprising of the common people against the authorities and particularly against the bishops and all priests.” Copp distanced himself from overt support for an uprising, instead encouraging peasants to avoid such actions. But even his admonition to the peasants left Copp far over the line of acceptable predictions. To judge by Copp’s next publication, few people failed to recognize the threat against the clergy from an ardent supporter of the Protestant Reformation. In 1523, Copp returned to the conjunction of 1524, in a judgment that was, according to its title, intended to be “described more clearly than a year ago.” The principal attempt at clarification came in the dedication, a notably self-abasing specimen of a notoriously obsequious genre, in which Copp emphasized his submission to the political and heavenly order. Copp proclaimed himself the servant of Prince-elector Frederick III of Saxony.

Illustrious, highborn prince, most gracious lord, may my poor submissive service be ever before your princely grace, etc. A year ago, after I had published a trivial little interpretation of the influence of the constellations and other prophecies that affect the year 1524 without a patron, most gracious prince and lord, I was attacked by several powerful individuals because of it, just as if I had done it out of envy and enmity toward the supposed priests or as if I had wanted to cause or incite an uprising against the authorities (may Christ turn such far from me!) . . . Why would I want to turn against such firm statements of the Holy Ghost and incite uproar against the princes, who are God’s servants? May such be far from me! I also hope that it may be found nowhere in that little book that I have caused any sedition. Rather, I only intended to show the rebellions that the prophecies and constellations indicate
are in the future, as far as it was in my power to make them loathsome to the common man. God well knows that I did not write out of envy towards the clergy, for I am no enemy of theirs. . . . Now, with more than your princely grace, I submissively ask that your princely grace overlook the disarray of the words but, rather, see only the heart and meaning along with my goodwill, and that your princely grace will be my most gracious and gracious lord.

What Copp lacked in 1522 was a noble patron, and what his booklet lacked was a dedication to reaffirm the political order to balance its predictions of rebellion and unrest. Given the chance to clarify matters in 1523, Copp did all in his power to deny any seditious intention. But in the end, Copp insisted that his predictions were accurate: “One also sees daily the great uproar of the common people against the authorities and especially those called clergy, as in Salzburg and elsewhere, which I all predicted.” Disarray of words, like misalignment of the planets, is not without consequence, and Copp had left Saxony for Bohemia by 1524.

When Johannes Carion complained about astrological prognostications with provocative title pages and lengthy introductions, he was remarking on two parts of the practicas that addressed the relationship between reader, book, and society. Carion’s complaint about the ridiculous length of prefaces in astrological booklets came at nearly the same time that Johannes Copp was demonstrating their necessity, but that very length, often two pages or more in what was typically only a sixteen-page booklet, indicates just how indispensable they were, as does Carion’s own frequent composition of lengthy prefaces; the preliminaries to his Interpretation and Revelation comprise nearly one-quarter of the entire work. The title (inasmuch as it contains a dedication), the title page (through the woodcut representations of particular classes or their cosmic representatives), and the dedication and conclusion (as a framing of the work as, first of all, a conversation between a prophet and a king) all reaffirm the existing order. Practicas and printed prophetic tracts were the opposite of revolutionary. With few exceptions, they sustained the existing political and religious hierarchies, at least in the form of an ideal Last Emperor, Angelic Pope, or Christian unity, but often enough in the form of the current mortal bearer of the papal or imperial crown. While prophetic and prognostic tracts could be enlisted by firebrands or revolutionaries, such contributions are infrequent and exceptional. The case of Johann Copp, who even disavowed any disruptive intent,
illustrates the real limits on the revolutionary potential of the practica genre or, for that matter, the medium of print.

The title woodcut for Wenzel Faber’s practica for 1490 placed the Earth at the center of a planetary wheel (so that it might be turned upside down but never moved from its place with respect to the cosmos) and, in so doing, captured the essential outlook of practicas. Various planets might rise and fall, so that Mars bears both a sword and a sovereign’s crown and orb as the year’s ruling planet. But this state was temporary; the angel turning the wheel does not rest from exercising God’s ultimate control over planetary motion. A woodcut from the title page of a practica published over fifty years later repeats the motif, in which a divine arm holds a wheel bearing four eclipses. The accompanying verse states, “I hold the wheel of fortune in my hand and turn it according to my will.”

Title pages into the late sixteenth century continue to evoke the same notion of a perpetual interchange of various planets—and thus also of social classes—by using two or three smaller, simpler, and inherently interchangeable woodcuts from year to year. The cosmic hierarchy was as clearly expressed in practicas as in Lichtenberger’s Prognosticatio. “For God in his goodness has given power to the highest things to rule the earthly and lowest bodies and has made the world subject to the stars of the heavens,” Virdung wrote in the prologue to his practica for 1493. Practicas were annual reminders that periodic waxing and waning of fortunes did not affect the continuing rule of greater things over lesser ones.

If early modern society was considered a microcosm of the heavenly constellation, then the practicas, which were meant to reflect the relationship between the configuration of the heavens and social structures, were microcosms in print. Practicas explained how the planets would affect various aspects of the world and human affairs, which imposed on the practicas an organizational structure that mirrored, in miniature, both society and the cosmos, so that the seven planets govern seven occupational classes and seven sections on human affairs in a printed practica. The essential difference between the practicas and the astrological prognostic broadsides is the difference in structure: the printed broadside distributed information, while the physical structure of booklets, the minimal example of the codex, imposed a structure on the information. Any number of chapters or sections would have been possible, and fifteenth-century formats varied widely. But as authors and printers rationalized the practica and popularized Virdung’s prototype, the eight leaves of the practicas were usually
matched with a similar number of chapters, and the two quires were often matched by a division into two sections. There is nothing magical about the seven planets, seven occupational classes, seven or eight chapters, and eight printed leaves, but neither is their similarity accidental. Already in the 1480s, Paul of Middelburg let the order of the cosmos bring structure to his twenty-year prognostication: “For indeed we shall divide it in headings after the fashion of the seven planets.”67 The structure of practicas reflected the orderly procession of the heavens and an orderly system of knowledge about the cosmos. Practicas were, above all else, about order, and their order extended from the heavenly spheres to human society, to chapter organization, to the way paper is cut and folded in making books. The evolution of the practica reflects real changes in society, new ways of imagining society, and new ways of representing knowledge in print.